

SB 1094: (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF READING MODELS OR PROGRAMS

As a parent of two children, a person who learned how to read and write well later in my own schooling, and as a literacy specialist, the terms of this mandate concern me both personally and professionally. I oppose any amendments that fall short of a complete suspension of the requirement that all districts adopt a specific program.

I have worked directly with teachers, interventionists, special education providers, principals and superintendents across many districts. The dedication of Connecticut's educators is a blessing. I have witnessed brilliant collaborations, both within and across districts, to study, learn, and implement best practices. So many CT teachers have dedicated years to developing curriculum, adapting resources, and innovating approaches in order to provide access for all learners. Yet, in one fell swoop, this mandate brushes all that time, wisdom, and success aside by suggesting schools replace their fine-tuned, personalized instructional models with a single one-size-fits-all program.

Starting at line 131 of Raised Bill No. 1094, it states:

"Scientifically-based reading research and instruction" means (A) a comprehensive program or a collection of instructional practices that is based on reliable, valid evidence showing that when such programs or practices are used, students can be expected to achieve satisfactory reading progress..."

In life, there is no "one size fits all" or even, "One size fits most." The strength of differentiation is using various approaches in a mix that best fits their scholars. Your best reading teachers, remediation teachers, interventionists know that you teach the child, the reader. Programs don't teach. Teachers teach!

However, there is no clear evidence suggesting that any of the "evidence-based" programs mandated by the State have resulted in "satisfactory reading progress." After observing these approved programs in a quite limited number of districts in and around Connecticut (and having to reach out to Detroit, Charlotte, Rhode Island, and Portchester), school leaders have been left underwhelmed, disheartened, and confused. The instructional practices, nor the unimpressive data of these schools defend the belief that local Boards should fund any of these programs.

This unfunded mandate comes at a huge cost—not only the million-dollar price tag, but more consequentially, the cost of our children. In many schools, rich, responsive, engaging classroom experiences will be substituted with teacher-directed lesson plans using intervention-model approaches. The books placed in children's hands will not reflect their personal interests. And based on a review of the programs on the State's list, in many cases, those books will neither be culturally-affirming nor representative of our diverse communities. Readers who are ready to soar to new heights will be caged by the parameters of "grade-level texts." And classroom teachers will have limited time and resources to support readers who are struggling to "crack the code." Further, authentic high-quality writing instruction will be replaced with text-based responses for the sake of standardized testing. We absolutely can not risk

dumbing-down instruction!

After the unprecedented disruption caused by the pandemic, the requirement to implement any new program will unquestionably cause another wave of disruption for this generation of kids. Teachers will be pulled from classrooms for training, administrators will have to juggle scheduling needs and a substitute teacher shortage, and students will be asked to, once again, adjust to a new normal. History shows that districts can expect an implementation lag as both teachers and children learn how to operate inside a new framework. Is this what's best for children? Isn't there a more prudent approach?

Put simply, despite my unwavering and total opposition to this mandate, I believe we are all on the same side. We all want children to learn to read and to love to read. The journey there will be (and always has been) different for each learner. Navigating those pathways requires flexibility. The "Right to Read" legislation does not allow for flexible, responsive curriculum development when it mandates adoption of a boxed program from a short list of narrow approaches.

I propose that trust is returned to local Boards and to classroom teachers so that they regain the control necessary to make decisions suited to the unique history of their district and in the best interest of their students.

I propose that districts be permitted (and encouraged) to draw on multiple sources (not one approved program) in order to develop a comprehensive homegrown curriculum.

I propose that the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success develop an ongoing relationship and productive partnership with local leaders to observe, learn, and discuss each district's unique model in order to identify successes and collaborate on ways to continually improve—drawing on ever-evolving research.

This is how we can make a lasting difference for *all* children.